

After Christmas, the shortgrass country caught three days of rain and drizzle on the already saturated ground.

Pickups slid close to the barrow ditches and cowboys waded across feed pens to the hay racks. Handouts for the hollow horns and woolies had to be postponed to keep the animals from tromping the cubes into the ground, and spring didn't seem near as distant as it did before the winter rains.

Feed mills claim the warm winters hurt their business. The big selloffs last fall also change prospects at the cubing plants from the startling black numerals of last season to a more modest shade of brown.

Most of us west of San Angelo were overstocked in the fall even if we had cut down to straight sheepdogs and jackrabbits. In spite of the drouth, my future looked promising. Half of my mother cows were sold at a special sale in October and three cullings on the sheep herd turned that business into a difficult pastime. After settling the freight and sales commissions, gate charges and chute fees, loading ramp and catwalk deductions, and special air and atmosphere taxes for auction sales, I invested the residue in range cubes and a revised payment of my income tax.

Twice the amount of feed was allotted to run the cattle as winter had already been going since the 20th of July and the 30 percent deduction for taxes looked like it was headed

for either Yugoslavia or Haiti, depending on the latest news from abroad.

High finance makes me nervous, especially when the risk of borrowed money enters the picture. I spent so much time waiting on loan officers from 1952 to up in the next decade that toward the end I wasn't sure if I was connected to the banking business or was a bitterweed sheep herder.

The jugkeepers over at San Angelo could make a cigar last through nine customers of my size without forming a quarter of an inch of ashes. The worst feeling was to be at the peak of justifying a deal and discover your banker was looking out the window watching the traffic lights change.

I can remember in December of about 1955 or '56 wondering why the jugs put up such big Christmas trees in the front lobby and reserved so little space on a note pad for their customers to celebrate the holidays. I had five or six kids by then. The exact year escapes me, but I do recall one of the home room teachers asking me to stop coming to the Christmas programs if I was going to start bawling every time Scrooge refused to give Tiny Tim's dad money for the holidays.

Before the drouth of the 50's ended, the same bunch of herders and farmers hit the loan department on the first of every month. I'd see them over and over sitting in the straight-backed chairs, crossing and recrossing their legs, and looking straight toward the far wall.

I don't know how long the terms reached past the 180 days written on the notes, or how long I owed more than value of my herd and all the fixtures. But the important part of the story is that somewhere back in the mysterious interworkings of those marble-floored and brass-caged jugs, a fearless loan committee, supported by a brave board of bank directors and patient stockholders, backed a play on collateral inequities that'd have given the wildest jockey to ever break from a starting gate cause to marvel at such a long shot.

Toward the end of the drouth in 1957, the strain showed on all of us, financier and herder alike. San Angelo's lakebeds were dry, all the cow herds were about liquidated, and the ones of us still in the sheep business owed from fifty to sixty dollars on ewes worth seven or eight bucks a head. So many hombres had bitten their lips so many times in quiet desperation, the whole idiom was changing to a lisped tongue.

Along in February, the rains started and lasted so long the draws finally ran clear water. Sometimes coming in from a walk, a shower will wisp across the path and the sensation comes back how good those first raindrops felt so many years ago....